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Leadership at Senior Levels of Command

by

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Prefatory Note

This paper describes a program for studying leadership at senior levels of military command and for developing a systematic framework from which to approach problems of leadership at high levels. The principal product was a source document in book form, entitled "Leadership at Senior Levels of Command," which is being processed for publication as part of the official Army literature for distribution to individuals and agencies concerned with leadership and leadership training.

The work was performed under Work Unit HIGHLEAD, Training for Leadership at Senior Levels of Command, at the Human Resources Research Office's Division No. 4 (Infantry), Fort Benning, Georgia.

LEADERSHIP AT SENIOR LEVELS OF COMMAND

Joseph A. Olmstead

The project described in this paper has the name HIGHLEAD. The HIGHLEAD project is unlike many others in one significant aspect: Whereas most of HumRRO's work rests upon bases of data collected through empirical study of the particular problem under consideration, HIGHLEAD is an effort to integrate, systematize, and apply relevant existing knowledge from the social sciences in order to provide a better understanding of a somewhat broad organizational role—the high-level military commander.

Work Unit HIGHLEAD is concerned with leadership at senior levels of command. By "senior levels" is meant those levels of command equivalent to or higher than a division commander. A division commander usually carries the rank of major general. Accordingly, the study deals with leadership as it is relevant to a broad range of upper-level command positions.

The work was undertaken at the request of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, which has responsibility for conducting training in leadership at senior levels. The overall aim is to provide a scientific basis for such training and for the development of a conceptual framework that can serve as the basis for a doctrine of leadership at senior levels.

The end product will be a book containing an analysis of high-level leadership and a general framework of principles and theory for use in fundamental instruction at the College and for promoting better understanding of senior leadership throughout the Army. Of particular interest is the fact that this project was initiated and continues to rest on two highly significant convictions:

(1) The first is a conviction by the Army, particularly the staff of the Command and General Staff College, that the source for development of a sound understanding of practical leadership lies in the behavioral and social sciences.

(2) The second is a conviction of HumRRO, especially this writer, that there presently exists in the behavioral and social sciences a body of findings and theory which is susceptible to interpretation and has sound relevance to applied leadership.

The Research

At this point, it is important to stress that we are using what may seem to be a rather restricted definition of leadership. For our purposes the term "leadership" is restricted, as Dr. Meredith Crawford, Director, Human Resources Research Office, has put it, to "those behaviors of the officer that serve to initiate, direct, and control

the actions of subordinates." Or, as it has been defined specifically in this project, "Leadership is the process of influencing the actions of individuals and organizations in order to obtain desired results." Thus, it can be seen that we are *not* dealing with the technical military, the tactical decision-making, or the more systems-oriented management aspects of command—except as they contribute to leadership as influence. We are viewing leadership purely in its interpersonal sense, with influence as the critical variable.

The research phase of the project involved two critical steps. In the first, the objective was, through role analysis, to learn as much as possible about the leadership role of the senior commander. Sources for this analysis were military literature and published accounts of military leadership at high levels, wherever they could be found. It was soon apparent that the official military literature in this area is almost nonexistent. Accordingly, it became necessary to go to memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, and histories to find material which permitted an analysis of the leadership role of the senior commander and of the kinds of leadership problems he faces. More than 50 sources of this sort were searched and used as source material.

Analysis of the leadership role of the senior commander led to the conclusion that the commander has two somewhat related, but different, major areas of endeavor in leading his organization:

(1) The first involves dealing with his organization as a whole, as a collectivity. Here, the commander is concerned with integrating, directing, and leading a multi-unit, hierarchical organization as a unit. He is concerned with thousands of men who are organized into subordinate units and sub-subordinate units with numerous interrelationships existing among them. He must develop and then maintain this organization as a highly motivated, smoothly functioning entity, sometimes under extremely difficult conditions such as combat, deprivation, and social isolation.

(2) The second area of endeavor for the commander involves leading and directing those subordinates with whom he works closely on a daily basis, his subordinate commanders and his staff. These individuals are usually highly capable and experienced in their own right and, accordingly, maximum effectiveness sometimes requires tactful and skillful handling. At this level, the relationships are on a closer, more interpersonal basis than in the first area of endeavor. The commander's influence is of a more direct, personal nature.

The second critical step of the research phase involved identification of the scientific concepts and findings that are relevant to high-level leadership. This required a survey of psychological, sociological, and where relevant, business management literature to identify the concepts and findings that could be applied.

The Conceptual Framework

Based on the research described, the approach that was developed conceives of senior leadership as a process of influencing individuals

and organizations in order to obtain desired results. The ability to influence is viewed as dependent on the accurate diagnosis of situations and action flexibility sufficient to cope with the constantly changing nature of these situations. This is similar to the approach to leadership taken by Benne (1). It leads to the conclusion that accurate diagnosis and appropriate action can occur only when the leader has at least a rudimentary understanding of the phenomena with which he is faced.

The kinds of phenomena confronting the senior commander fall under the two areas of endeavor mentioned earlier as shown in our role analysis. In the first area, the commander is concerned with his unit as an organized entity. Acknowledging the distance between the senior commander and most operating personnel, it was concluded that, here, much of his influence is indirect. Most of his leadership must be exercised through the creation of organizational conditions which will be conducive to the effective performance of personnel. In this regard, the approach taken views the organization as an interactional social system. Here, Sherif's work on the development of natural groups (2) and his work on intergroup relations (3), together with Likert's ideas on organizational development (4) appear to be the most relevant. From this basis, a cognitive-motivational conception of the organization was developed around certain key concepts—namely, goals and goal perception, organizational cohesiveness, identification with the organization, and the internalization of organization norms.

The second area of endeavor is concerned with the close interpersonal relationships existing between the commander and his immediate subordinates. Here, some of the more conservative work of McGregor (5) is relevant. Just as in business, high-level officers are best led by the establishment of clear objectives, delegation of sufficient authority and responsibility, and the freedom to act within the realm of their responsibilities. One interesting conclusion was the high importance at these levels of achievement motivation. The motivation to achieve, with all of its ramifications for leading such individuals, appears to be highly important. Finally, much of the small group research is important in the leadership of high-level subordinates. The senior commander, his staff, and his immediately subordinate commanders usually form a more or less cohesive command team. Group dynamics concepts are especially relevant.

Thus, it can be seen that we have made an essentially social-psychological analysis of leadership as it is influenced and modified by a specific context—a large hierarchical, military organization. We have described this analysis in a book of 17 chapters assembled in the form of an introductory chapter and three major parts.

The introductory chapter is designed to set the orientation in terms of high-level leadership of large multi-unit military organizations. Part I is concerned with the commander as leader, and consists of five chapters. The first presents a general analysis of the process of leading—including diagnostic skills and action flexibility, leadership functions, and the influence process. The second chapter includes an analysis of the role of the senior commander and an examination of

the ways requirements of this role affect and modify the basic leadership process. The next three chapters deal with factors involved in the influence and control of both individual and organizational behavior. They cover such matters as control, the role of authority in leadership, and communication.

Part II consists of five chapters dealing with those variables involved in leading the organization as a whole. The basic orientation conceives of the organization as an interactional social system functioning within the confines of a formal hierarchical structure. Such topics are discussed as the dynamics of organizations; the properties of formal organizations; the functions of organizational goals; the development of unity, cohesion, motivation, and morale. There is an analysis of those factors that serve to regulate and codify behavior, such as rules, procedures, discipline, and social norms.

Part III consists of six chapters dealing with the working relationships between the commander and those high-level subordinates with whom he works closely. Here, the chapters are concerned with directing subordinate commanders; relations between the senior commander and his staff; the staff as a problem-solving group; relations between staff and line officers; performance goals and standards for subordinates; motivational factors relevant at the level of subordinate commanders and staff; and factors contributing to cooperation and teamwork among key command and staff personnel.

The volume closes with a summary chapter intended to present an overview and reemphasize some of the major points from earlier chapters.

In summary, the purpose of the book is to integrate existing knowledge and theory into a systematic analysis which can serve as a fundamental basis for understanding command leadership.

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